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Nathan lit a cigarette like he was trying to light the past on fire. “The Carpenters,” he said, the name itself tasting like polyester and disappointment. “Do you think they fucked?”

The bartender froze halfway through polishing a glass.
“Excuse me?”

“Brother and sister fucking. Highly unrecommended. Genetically, therapeutically, and legally inadvisable. But… come on. Picture it.” Nathan waved his cigarette in the air like a conductor about to summon incest from the orchestra pit.

“I mean, a *band* with your family. How’s that supposed to work? You can’t even make dinner without someone crying over the potatoes. Now imagine recording *Close to You* while

your brother's watching the metronome and thinking about your vocal range. Creepy."

He took a sip of whiskey. "So you're The Carpenters. You've just come back from the Grammy Awards. John Belushi and Keith Richards were at the afterparty, snorting pure Colombian joy. You, meanwhile, go home, brush your teeth, and go to bed with matching flannel pajamas. Please. Humanity's greatest lie is that The Carpenters were wholesome."

He stubbed out the cigarette, looked at his reflection in the bar mirror, and muttered, "Every 'Close to You' has a 'too close' hidden in it."

The jukebox, as if offended, skipped from Sinatra to Karen Carpenter herself —
🎵 *Why do birds suddenly appear…*

Nathan sighed. "Because, darling, they heard the gossip."

Nathan had just turned on the radio to hear the local news — you know, war, corruption, and mild weather in the south — when it happened.

A sound.
Not music. Not melody. A *vibe*. The kind of noise that could make a deaf monk develop tinnitus.

“The fuck is this horror?” he said aloud, staring at the radio as though it had just insulted his ancestors.

He grabbed his phone. “Wait, they taught me this… you click the thing, it recognizes the song. Okay, let’s see. No, not that app — that one’s for storing your exes’ naked pictures. Right, this one. Click.”

A few seconds of silence. Then:
TAYLOR SWIFT — ‘Cruel Summer’

Nathan blinked. “Taylor *Swift*? What the hell is a *swift tailor*? One who sews you a suit in four minutes?”

He paused, frowned at the radio again. “Dear mind, this is garbage. Absolute, industrial-grade, ocean-polluting garbage. There’s more soul in a dial-up connection than in this melody.”

He changed the station. Same thing. Another. Same voice. It was like Taylor Swift had franchised reality.

He poured himself a drink. “If Dante were alive,” he said to the empty room, “he’d need a tenth circle. For people who dance to this.”

“You only listen to dead people music,” she once said, in that tone that usually precedes either a breakup or an aneurysm.

Nathan blinked. “I do *what*?”

“You heard me.”

“I most certainly do not,” he said, indignant, like a priest accused of public decency. “Keith Richards, Willie Nelson, Eric Clapton — they’re all still well and alive, aren’t they? And probably for the same reason: they injected *formaldehyde* in the ’70s. Preserved better than Tutankhamun, those bastards.”

He poured himself a drink that could double as jet fuel and continued, “Also, Paul Simon’s alive. But that’s for a *totally different* reason.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Which is?”

“Because he’s evil incarnate,” Nathan said, matter-of-factly. “He walks this earth collecting souls for Beelzebub. Ask Art Garfunkel. Poor bastard hasn’t had a reflection since ’86.”

She stared. “You’re insane.”

Nathan shrugged. “Insane? Maybe. But at least my music doesn’t come with a dance challenge and an influencer discount code.”

Nathan tapped the bar with one finger — the international sign for “philosophy incoming.”

“There. That,” he said. “‘There’s an old man sitting next to me, making love to his tonic and gin.’ That’s it. That’s songwriting. Not ‘he looked at me across the club and I knew we were twin flames.’”

He stared into his glass. “Give me one line like that — that simplicity, that quiet truth — and I’ll try and listen to the song. Just *one*.”

He leaned back. “One that sounds like it was written by a human who’s seen some things, not by a committee of ring lights.”

Then, softly, almost to himself, he said, “Give me something like:

There's a woman humming to the jukebox, and she doesn't know it's off."

He smiled faintly. "That… I could listen to."

Nathan swirled his drink like a philosopher examining a small amber planet of meaning.

"Also," he said, finger raised like a priest about to declare heresy, "notice the *subtle elegance* — *tonic and gin*, not *gin and tonic.* Words matter. Their order matters. And, yes, partly for metrics, but mostly because truth hides in syntax."

He leaned forward, conspiratorial. "That's how you order it at a bar: tonic *and* gin. Meaning tonic first — with a hint of gin, a suggestion, a whisper of ruin. Not the other way around. Not the colonial 'gin and tonic' nonsense, all swagger and malaria prevention."

He sipped, winced. "I once made a *real* gin and tonic. Vancouver. Sixteen years ago. They'd

asked for it — clearly, explicitly. I obliged. Four glasses. One bottle of Gordon's. Fair math, if you ask me."

He shrugged. "Then they complained. 'Too strong,' they said. Oh, I'm sorry — you wanted a *Tonic and Gin,* not a *Gin and Tonic.* Next time, conjugate your poison correctly."

He finished the drink, slammed it down, and muttered, "Learn to speak. And to drink like adults. Bunch of sissy cunts."

Nathan sat at the bar like a man waiting for history to apologize.

"Glad you can drink tap water in this city," he said.

"Yes, sir," said the barman, polite, neutral, the professional tone of someone who's seen worse than thirst.

"Can I get another glass, please?"

“Sir,” the barman hesitated, “that is straight gin you’re drinking.”

Nathan looked at the triangular glass. “Oh. That’s why it comes in this little pyramid thing, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” said the barman. “I chilled it for you. When there’s some vermouth and a lemon peel or an olive in it, we call it a Martini. But you were… very clear about your order.”

Nathan nodded slowly. “I see. Good drink anyway.”
He frowned. “So when did I order this instead of tap water?”

“I suppose in 1993, sir. Hard to tell. You never did it in this bar.”

Nathan smiled faintly, as though remembering a time before hydration existed. “I see, I see. Please, let me have the tab and open another.”

The barman complied. Nathan signed with a flourish and added a 150% tip.

“Sir, that is—”

“Hush,” Nathan said. “Keep that *swift tailor* out of this room, and I’ll see to these keeping coming.”

The barman froze, then, in a sudden fit of survival instinct, reached under the counter and queued up the complete works of Duke Ellington.

By the third chorus of *Mood Indigo*, he was in the backroom, lit only by candlelight, setting up a Ouija board.
“Miss Fitzgerald,” he whispered, “we may need you again. The heathens have returned.”

Nathan raised his glass, stared into it like it contained not gin but the memory of civilization.

“Hank,” he said.

The barman — whose name was absolutely not Hank, but who had long given up correcting people with liver damage — replied, “Yes, sir?”

“Have you ever been to San Francisco?”

“Once, sir.”

“Isn’t it just a *charm*,” Nathan said dreamily, “to be where little cable cars climb halfway to the stars?”

“Yes, sir,” said not-Hank.

“The morning fog may chill the air…” Nathan swirled the gin. “I don’t care.”

“Neither do I, sir. Would you like me to put on some Tony Bennett?”

“Oh no, no,” Nathan said, waving a hand. “Just making conversation. The man doesn’t need to die twice in the same evening.”

“Yes, sir. Another tap water?”

“Is it always clean?” Nathan asked. “Or does it get dirty sometimes?”

The barman nodded solemnly. “I’ll see and let some olive brine drop in.”

Nathan smiled. “Good man.”

The barman poured, handed over the glass with reverence. “A hundred and fifty percent better than any other you can find, sir.”

Nathan lifted the glass in salute. “That’s why I keep coming back to the Church of Hank.”

“Bless you, sir,” said the barman, crossing himself with the cocktail stirrer.

The beauty of some dive bars is that they are open 24/7 — because despair doesn’t keep office hours.
So was Hank’s.

(The bar was not his, and his name was *still* not Hank.)

At 4 a.m., the barmen changed shifts.
The new guy, still half-asleep and reeking faintly of disinfectant and regret, glanced toward the end of the counter.

“Is he all right?” he asked.

Nathan was there, hunched like a monument to poor decisions, talking to a bottle of Tanqueray as if it had tenure.

“It’s quarter to three,” Nathan murmured, “there’s no one in the place except you and me. So set ’em up, Hank, I got a little story I think you should know…”

The new barman blinked.

“…We’re drinkin’, my friend, to the end of a brief episode. Make it one for my baby — and one more for the road.”

He turned to his colleague. “He’s quoting Sinatra to the gin?”

“Quoting, confessing — line’s blurry around 4 a.m.,” said the previous barman, pulling off his apron.

He handed over the receipt with the 150% tip.

The new guy whistled. “Oh, I already love him. Who’s Hank?”

The older barman smiled tiredly, clapped him on the shoulder.
“You are now,” he said. “A hundred and fifty percent you.”

And as the old barman walked out into the grey dawn, Nathan raised his glass toward the new Hank and said, “To consistency, my friend — the last luxury of the damned.”

Rows and floes of angel hair.
And ice cream castles in the air.

Nathan nodded to himself. “Ice cream castles in the air,” he muttered. “Yes, please. Why the hell not? Why can’t we have that again — someone who *looks* at clouds from both sides now, who actually sees *feather canyons* instead of engagement metrics?”

He raised his glass to no one in particular. “Just once, give me a song where someone marvels at a cloud instead of apologizing for their ex. And, while we’re at it, let it be sung by a jazz voice — one that can actually *ride* the notes of Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius like a wave instead of drowning in Auto-Tune.”

He sighed. “Yeah. Just that. Nothing complicated.”

He took another sip. “Oh, oh, oh… maybe — but *maybe* — just an idea here… Hey, farmer, farmer, put away your DDT. Give me spots on

my apples, but leave me the birds and the bees. Just a *suggestion* here."

The barman, who was now officially *Hank II*, was quietly polishing a glass and humming, almost to himself,

♫ "They paved paradise to put up a pa-parking lot…" ♫

Nathan smiled faintly. "Exactly, Hank. They paved it. And now they call it Spotify."